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Saudi Royal Family Unites Amid Crisis

Heirs of a desert warrior run the oil-rich nation as a private realm. But with the modern world pressing in, big changes are in the wind.

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia

Hemmed in by trouble from all sides, the royal family that rules this desert kingdom is closing ranks in a concerted effort to cope with zealots at home and an oil-hungry world outside.

Even with its vital oil reserves—the richest on earth—Saudi Arabia has little to cheer about.

King Khalid, 66, suffers from a serious heart ailment, and his days on the throne could be numbered. Moslem radicals and even some young military men are questioning royal rule.

Turmoil in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and a strong Russian presence in the neighboring Marxist nation of South Yemen raise serious questions about the country's security.

On one side, the United States pressures the House of Saud to keep oil output high and prices low. On the other, radical Arab states want Riyadh to use its oil weapon against Washington in order to destroy U.S.-sponsored peace negotiations between Egypt and Israel.

Mainly because of health problems, King Khalid has long given up his attempts to govern Saudi Arabia's day-to-day affairs. That has been the job of 59-year-old Crown Prince Fahd, who has been chosen as Khalid's successor.

With the King the symbol of the Saud dynasty, the royal family's rule over Saudi Arabia is near absolute and until recently was troubled only by the maneuvering for power of rival princes.

Royal complacency was shattered last November, however, when a force of Moslem zealots seized the Great Mosque in Mecca, the holiest shrine in this puritanically religious Islamic country.

The takeover, discovery of caches of illegal weapons in desert villages and realization that there is budding political opposition in this country jolted the Saudi princes and

drew them together in a joint determination to set the situation right.

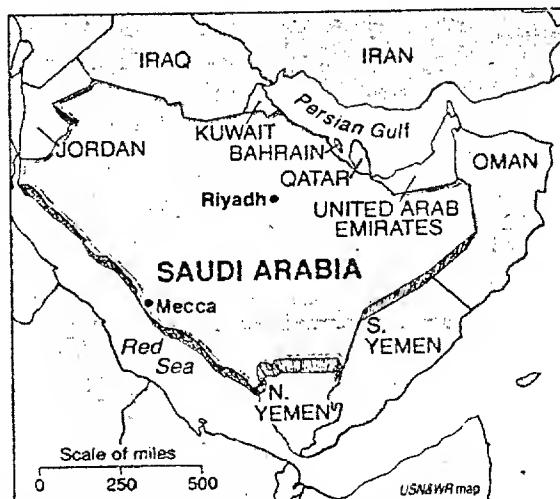
In the aftermath of the Mecca battle, rival princes firmed up the line of succession to the throne, and Fahd tried to quiet unrest by promising the country its first constitution.

If he follows through, it will be a radical shift for Saudi Arabia, described by a Western diplomat as "the only family-owned enterprise recognized at the U.N." The House of Saud is all pervasive in this nation of 7.8 million people. One of every 2,000 Saudis is a full-fledged prince. An elite of 150 senior princes dominates every level of commerce, government and the military.

Crown Prince Fahd is the royal family's choice to succeed ailing King Khalid.



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King Khalid plays shrinking role in running day-to-day affairs of Saudi nation.

Founder of the dynasty was a Bedouin warrior named Abdel Aziz, better known internationally as Ibn Saud, who set out on horseback in 1902 with 40 companions and a dream of conquering a country half the size of the U.S. east of the Mississippi. It took him 30 years to subdue the scattered Arabian tribes and to mold a nation.

To insure the loyalty of his enemies, Ibn Saud took wives from each conquered tribe. Before he died in 1953, he had fathered at least 40 sons, including Khalid and Fahd.

Ibn Saud was succeeded by King Saud, who was forced to abdicate in 1964 in favor of Faisal, who in turn was assassinated by a deranged nephew in 1975. Then Khalid took over. In all, there are more than 4,000 Saudi princes and almost as many princesses.

Loosening grip? Recent years have brought changes to Saudi Arabia that threaten to loosen the royal grip. An infusion of oil wealth—90 billion dollars a year—not only poses a danger to traditional Islamic values embraced by most Saudis, but it has spawned an educated, well-to-do middle class that seeks a larger role in government.

In theory, the King owns everything in his realm. He consults no parliament of outsiders. Decisions are made by a royal council where family factions push and shove to get their way. Private though it is, the council lately has begun to feel pressure from nonroyal sources, including religious leaders and a sizable technocracy that has grown up with the oil industry.

Western experts believe that Fahd may be the most capable and experienced of all the princes. He has been the actual Saudi leader for years, in part because of political savvy and partly because of Khalid's retiring nature.

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